

SCAFFOLDING FOR PEER FEEDBACK SESSION: WHAT, WHY, AND HOW?

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Abstract

Recent research has shown the value of peer feedback in writing class. By evaluating their peer's work, students can figure out the strengths and weaknesses of their friends' drafts. After doing this, it is expected that they could compare their peer's work to their own work, which will certainly be beneficial for the revision process. The biggest challenge I faced when implementing peer feedback is how to scaffold the students to be able to provide valuable input to their friends' work. This ability is important because the input students give to their friends could become a reflection to their own draft. This sharing is based on what I experienced during Expository and Argumentative Writing Class last semester, particularly on what I did before, during, and after the peer feedback session. To get clearer idea about the classroom situation, I will provide some examples of the task sheets used. I will also provide some empirical evidence from the student worksheets. I expect that my sharing could enrich our understanding on how to use peer feedback sessions, particularly on how to scaffold the students to provide valuable peer feedback.

Keywords: scaffolding, peer feedback

INTRODUCTION

Peer feedback has been accepted as a valuable tool to improve students' writing ability (e.g. Tsui & Ng, 2000; Mendonça & Johnson, 1994; Ekşi, 2012; Shih-hsien, 2011). Jacobs, Curtis, Brain & Huang (1998) assured that peer feedback could function as 'unique scaffolding'. Through interaction with their class peers, students could gain useful ideas in their revisions and enable them to reflect on their own writing (Lan, 2009). Interestingly, some studies (e.g. Jaeho, 2013; Lundstrom & Baker, 2009) found out that the effects of providing peer feedback is as beneficial as receiving peer feedback.

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One should note, however, that to obtain maximum results from peer feedback in L2 writing class requires efforts from the teachers. Some experts claimed that L2 learners mistrusted their friends in terms of language proficiency (Zhang, 1995; 1999), students may not be capable of rating peers' writing due to their own ineffective linguistic competence (Saito and Fujita, 2004), and the traditional role of a teacher has been deeply rooted in students' minds (Sengupta, 1998). The teachers, therefore, need to convince the students the value of peer feedback, and as Moore and Teather (2013) claimed, prepare the students to give and receive feedback.

This sharing is based on what I experienced during Expository and Argumentative writing class last semester, particularly on what I did before, during, and after the peer feedback session. To get clearer idea about the classroom situation, I will provide some examples of the task sheets used. I will also provide some empirical evidence from the student worksheets. I expect that my sharing could enrich our understanding on how to use peer feedback sessions, particularly on how to scaffold the students to provide valuable peer feedback.

SCAFFOLDING IN L2 WRITING CLASSES

Scaffolding was first coined by Wood, Bruner, and Ross in 1976 as 'a process of negotiated interaction in which experts first assess the learners' level of competence and determine the types of assistance they need to accomplish a particular task' (Hall, 2002: 31). This definition contains two elements, i.e. interaction and support from expert. During the peer feedback session, the students will become 'the experts'. One should note, however, that L2 students' competencies are still developing. Hence, the teachers need to provide enough scaffolding to maximize the use of peer review in L2 writing classes. Shieh-hsien (2011) claimed that the teacher's leading role could be reduced as some students become more skillful and independent in correcting errors for their peers.

Many students may not yet be accustomed to give feedback to and receive feedback from their peers. Giving feedback to their peers could make them feel uncomfortable as they might appear more superior to their friends. Criticism may often be viewed as something embarrassing, so it has to be avoided. As a result, the students are reluctant to initiate comments on their peers' essays (Carson and Nelson, 1996), and prefer to offer positive than direct negative comments to their peers (Villamil and Guerrero, 1996). Shieh-hsien (2011) shared Burrough-Boenisch (2003) that 'teachers could equip students with the sense of ownership and authorship.' She explained further that this could be done by requiring students to appreciate the peer evaluation and understanding that changes and corrections were negotiable.

It is well noted that feedback has to be something that helps students do better in the next task, or something that can immediately be used to improve their final product (Price, Handley, Millar & O'Donovan, 2010). L2 writing, however, is a complex process involving a number of cognitive factors, such as linguistic knowledge, speed of processing, and metacognitive knowledge (Jaeho, 2013). As the students' language proficiency is still developing, it is not surprising to find some experts (e.g. Connor & Asenavage, 1994; Mangelsdorf & Schlumberger, 1992; Yang, Bager, & Yu, 2006) doubt the effectiveness of peer feedback. The validity and reliability of the students as raters, for example, are still questioned. Considering this, Jaeho (2013) suggested to implement what he called as 'teacher-peer-combined feedback'. The teacher feedback, in this case, can scaffold the peer feedback.

Black and William (1998) explained four conditions on how classroom assessment could enhance learning effectively. First is when learners clearly understand how they will be assessed. Second is when learners are able to identify both their current level of achievement and the desired level of achievement. Third is when they are able to obtain information about the gap and about how to close the gap; and last is when they actually use the information to close the gap. It is expected that the peer review in L2 writing classes could be of help to achieve these four conditions. However, before the students are able to achieve this during or after the peer review session, the teachers need to guide the students through the activities provided. Providing models is also beneficial.

CONTEXT

Expository and Argumentative Writing (EAW) is a pre-requisite course students have to take before Academic Writing course. This course is given on the second year. The students have to pass the other two writing courses before taking EAW. This course introduces the students to two other types of essay, i.e., expository and argumentative essays.

Twenty one students were taking my class last semester. As I wanted the students to experience writing more as a process than a product, the class was held on the computer laboratory. The students need to be getting lots of writing practice. They should also have more opportunities for improvement through discussion, collaboration, and feedback.

There were fourteen meetings in one semester. I used the first seven meetings to practice expository essay writing, and the last seven meetings to practice argumentative essay. The activities consisted of reading texts, writing drafts, and feedback (from teacher and peers). The assessments consisted of two final drafts, continuous assessments, and a portfolio.

THE CLASSROOM PRACTICES

In the first meeting, I assigned my students to write a 150-word paragraph about their experience on registration process or first class to check their writing ability. From their drafts, I could learn that they still had problems in developing a good topic sentence and building relevant supporting details to their topic sentence. I started with a review on how to write a good paragraph on the second meeting. I also provided a task sheet asking the students to identify whether their friends' drafts had a clear purpose, a clear topic sentence, and relevant supporting details. I expected that after listening to my review they could evaluate their friend's drafts. However, as most of the students put a check mark on 'YES' option to almost all the questions, the peer feedback session did not work very well. This meeting made me realize that it was not easy for my students to give comments.

I repeated the peer feedback activity again in the fourth meeting using a different task sheet. The task sheet asked about the components of an introductory paragraph I explained a week before. I also asked them to write their feedback this time hoping that they could elaborate their opinions. However, they only wrote *'You wrote the paragraph clearly'* or *'The reader will not have difficulties reading your draft'* on their feedback column. I noticed from this meeting that the students seemed to avoid providing direct criticism or negative feedback. They felt unconfident to criticize their friends' work, and perhaps they did not want to embarrass their peers as well. Knowing this, I then discussed some drafts to the whole class. I convinced them that negative feedback could also be positive when it was delivered appropriately. It was after several weeks before they finally could produce comments such as:

For me, the background information is not really clear. Maybe you can put more information so the sentences will have a better coherence with the hook and also the thesis statement. (Student 8)

The background is clear enough, although maybe it contains too much opinion (which should probably be better in the thesis statement). (Student 20)

As peer feedback needs to be effective, I also shared them the assessment rubrics. I asked them to evaluate their own draft using the rubric. After that I asked them to evaluate their friends' drafts. They could then check whether they evaluated themselves similar to their friends. As I walked around, I found that my students were too generous to their friends, but so stingy to their own self. I then chose three drafts randomly and asked

the students to evaluate them. I compared my score and their score, and we discussed the reasons. When we discussed a draft, I asked why Vicky (pseudonyms) gave much lower score than I did. She explained that the draft was not good enough. She mentioned problems in coherency and choice of words. I disagreed to her as I thought that the draft was excellent. At the end I found out that we were actually discussing Vicky's draft.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

How to make the peer feedback obtains maximum result is challenging. Observing my students during the peer review sessions makes me aware more of the roles I have to play as a teacher. If I only asked my students to read and gave comments without giving appropriate guidance, they would simply say that their friends' works were good enough. This is probably a typical Asian student's habit. They prefer not to tell the truth than to make their friend's lose their face. Besides, they might also be confused of what to say, or they might focus only on the grammatical items. With the present approaches in L2 learning in general and teaching writing in particular, the peer feedback session has to be more meaningful.

Reflecting back to my experience teaching EAW class, I could figure out that scaffolding for peer feedback session is cyclical process. Through the teacher's scaffolding, the students are expected to be able to scaffold their peers. Teacher's flexibility, therefore, becomes the main ingredient to provide appropriate supports. This does not mean that a teacher does not do any preparation at all, but to be able to assess the students' progress in each of the meetings and offer appropriate supports to help them accomplish the tasks as how scaffolding has been defined (Wood, Bruner & Ross, 1976 in Hall, 2002).

Before a peer feedback session, a teacher needs to predict the students' current level of achievement and their potentials. The task or activity designed should be able to make the students aware of their current level and guide them to achieve the desired level. One simple example is guided questions relevant to the topic discussed before. These guided questions could be used to evaluate the students' drafts and could function as discussion topics.

During the peer feedback session, a teacher needs to observe the students' responses. A class feedback could be held after the peer back session to evaluate the peer feedback and to figure out whether the students would be able close the gap between their current level and desired level of achievement. This is important to help the teacher modify the tasks or design new tasks or activity for reinforcement.

Last, I should say that teacher scaffolding for peer feedback session in an L2 writing class requires hard work. However, it is worth trying as this could support the current pedagogy in writing. More responsibility has shifted from teachers to learners. Moreover, as the students could evaluate and improve their own works, they could direct their own learning and engage in lifelong learning.

THE AUTHOR

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